

Jan Hus

A Connection between Belief and National Identity

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Abstract

Jan Hus was a Bohemian preacher who was burned at the stake at the Council of Constance in 1415. However, Hus's legacy well outlived his death, and six centuries later, he continues to be considered a symbol of Czech identity today. Using his letters written in exile and while awaiting trial at Constance, this article explores key aspects of Hus's theology and how they gave momentum to the movement that arose after his death and has experienced an unparalleled longevity. Hus's pursuit of truth, his frustrations with the practices of the church at the time, and his allegiance to Czech-speaking people resonated beyond the religious realm and paved the way for an early form of protonationalism.

Article

What turns a believer into a martyr? Further, how does one's legacy become a symbol of national identity that goes beyond the walls of the church for centuries thereafter? The answer to these questions lies in a perfect cocktail of societal and religious volatility fueled by unwavering belief. In the fourteenth century, the church found itself in a crisis of authority and power that also plagued broader society. There was turmoil in the Kingdom of Bohemia, as it experienced several shifts in centers of power. In 1378, the Catholic Church had two popes: one residing in Avignon and the other in Rome. The Papal Schism had several important implications: The church was no longer speaking on behalf of all in Western Europe, and in Bohemia, there was no longer one Christian people held together by a homogenous and indivisible church. These divisions gave way for new social and religious movements to gain momentum.

One of the most notable figures of this era was Jan Hus, a Bohemian preacher who was burned at the stake as a heretic for his beliefs at the Council of Constance in 1415. Jan Hus rose to popularity in Bohemia for his teachings and criticisms of the Catholic Church but became beloved by many Czech people for his advocacy of translating the Bible into the vernacular, making the Bible accessible to all Czech people. His beliefs were considered heretical, and he was excommunicated and spent two years living in exile while awaiting trial at Constance. During this time, he wrote roughly eighty letters that were addressed to a variety of audiences: religious leaders, political leaders, and his beloved Praguers. Hus's letters in exile and while awaiting trial at Constance reflect his emphasis on the importance of truth, his frustrations with the church and its practices, and the importance of teaching in the vernacular. This is significant as it helps us see the possible connections between his theology and politics that allowed a number of people to see him as symbolic of various

forms of Czech national identity that were a catalyst to events like the Hussite Wars, the Thirty Years' War, and nineteenth and early twentieth century nationalist movements.

Situating the Emergence of Hus: Political and Religious Upheavals in Late Medieval Bohemia

Understanding the political context in the Kingdom of Bohemia leading up to the time of Hus is important. In Bohemia, the Luxemburg dynasty ruled from 1310 to 1437. The first ruler of this dynasty, John of Luxemburg (1310-1346), was the son of the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry VII, and his placement on the Bohemian throne can be attributed to the prominence of Bohemia and its integration in European affairs.¹ John was well known throughout Europe in military and political spheres, and while his reign was not particularly notable, upon his death, it was said by his contemporaries that the Kingdom of Bohemia was on its way to becoming a powerful state in Central Europe.² His reign was followed by Charles, whose rule would solidify the Kingdom of Bohemia's prominent status in Europe. The kingdom would expand both in size and influence; several small principalities, duchies, and territories would become part of the Kingdom of Bohemia. Charles would select Prague as the seat of power and, ultimately, of the Holy Roman Empire. Additionally, Prague was made the seat of an archbishopric in the 1340s.³ In 1348, Charles University was established in Prague as the first institution of higher learning in Central Europe, and it would have a prominent role in the Bohemian Reformation.⁴ Charles sought to make Prague the cultural center of Central Europe and his reign was marked by relative peace and prosperity and contributed to Bohemia's "golden age." Although a charismatic ruler who promoted the Czech language throughout the empire, many of his contributions to Bohemia would not survive him.

Following his reign, Václav IV came to power, and the underlying issues that Charles perhaps covered up with his charisma came to the surface with Václav's reign. One of these issues was his failure to permanently strengthen the royal house against a nobility hungry for power. Socioeconomic problems were also coming to light during this time; as much as half of the population of Prague in the fourteenth century lived on the cusp of poverty. Further, other factors such as the fluctuation of wages, which impacted immigration into Bohemia, and the subsequent disruption that the epidemic of the Black Death caused in Bohemia has been speculated to heighten tensions between ethnic groups during economic crises. While these cannot be taken as definite conclusions or correlations, it is important to consider these volatile factors and how they may have had immediate ramifications and also impacted the future Hussite Revolution.⁵ All of this, in addition to the Papal Schism that coincided with Václav's reign, further complicated matters as he did not wield the same authority that Charles did. External threats came forth when leaders from Hungary, Austria, and Moravia signed a treaty against Václav, and he was arrested. Sigismund, King

¹ Thomas A. Fudge, *The Magnificent Ride: The First Reformation in Hussite Bohemia*, St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 5.

² Fudge, *The Magnificent Ride*, 7.

³ Thomas A. Fudge, *Jan Hus: Religious Reform and Social Revolution in Bohemia*, International Library of Historical Studies 73 (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 19.

⁴ Fudge, *The Magnificent Ride*, 8.

⁵ Fudge, *Jan Hus*, 21.

of Hungary, would seek to install himself as ruler in Bohemia during this time, as well as muffle any support for Václav in the kingdom. These events led to distrust and suspicion amongst the public, and it is these political instabilities that created opportunities for figures to become symbolic of a people.

Whereas the church previously had been a uniting and consolidated force in society, in this time, it found itself at the height of the Papal Schism and instead the source of division and antagonism. Naturally, when a longstanding institution such as the Catholic Church experienced such levels of internal dissent that it threatened their authority, any external dissent needed to be silenced. It is important to note that within Prague, the church had a wealth of power; it was home to numerous churches and related institutions. Parallel to Avignon, Prague evolved into a city of clerics, with thousands studying at Charles University and thousands in service.⁶ Another dynamic that added to this volatile environment was the growing association that the church had with materialism in light of such influence and power. In the totality of the Bohemian kingdom, the percentages of land owned by the church ranges from 25 to over 50 percent. While these figures are debated, they are important to note as this correlation between the church and ownership of property would be a pillar of not only Hus's personal theology but also the Hussite movement. Records exist of clergy who engaged in illicit behaviors or who had no desire to work among the people in their parish, which Hus strongly opposed.⁷ In November of 1412, Jan Hus wrote a letter to his beloved Praguers while in exile. Hus writes to them about how he heard that the Catholic Church was trying to prevent services where their "iniquities [were being] denounced" and that the more "they wish to conceal their wickedness, the more they reveal it."⁸ The entirety of this letter reads like the product of an unstable environment, which Hus certainly was experiencing.

The Theology of Jan Hus

In this letter "To the Praguers," Hus acknowledges their desire for God and the truth and prays for them to not be led astray despite the "wiles of the Antichrist." This letter encourages the Praguers to "not be dismayed, nor let fear trouble [them]."⁹ Hus also asks them to pray for him, so that he may defend the truth, for he knows that nothing is lacking in God's word to the Praguers. This letter is arguably one of the best examples we have of the sum of his theology and its devoted connection to the people of Prague. Furthermore, it is evident that Hus's theology was committed to truth above all else—which, although he never explicitly defined it, was a central theme in his writings.

Hus's definition of "truth" and his moral and ethical compass is evident in another letter, "To the Lords Gathered at the Supreme Court of the Kingdom of Bohemia." The letter contains statements such as "in continuing to preach the word of God and in truth as I see

⁶ Fudge, *Jan Hus*, 22.

⁷ Fudge, *The Magnificent Ride*, 15-16.

⁸ Jan Hus, "John Hus to the Praguers c. November 1412," in *The Letters of John Hus*, trans. Matthew Spinka (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972), 81.

⁹ "John Hus to the Praguers c. November 1412," in *The Letters of John Hus*, 79.

it.”¹⁰ His commitment to truth is also evident in his belief of adhering to the law of Christ, even if it meant defying one’s superior, yet being equally prepared to submit to authority should one be proven wrong. However, for Hus, being proven wrong was only considered truth if it was done with the Bible as the sole and final authority and not papal authority. This assertion, while bold in nature, is necessary in the eyes of Hus given the turmoil the Catholic Church was experiencing during this time.

While the church was in a volatile state, Hus turned to other sources to help make sense of his personal beliefs. He relied heavily on Augustine for the development of his stances on doctrines such as predestination, the concept of the church, and clerical wickedness. Speaking to the latter of these, in a letter he addressed to a nobleman, he speaks of the ways in which the clergy is at fault for “filling their purses with deceit...thus speaks St. Augustine.”¹¹ In Hus’s treatise *De Ecclesia (The Church)*, Augustine is mentioned over one hundred times. In many ways, it is evident that Hus held Augustine in high regard, but it must be noted that he likely did not have access to his works and knew his writings from the theologian Peter Lombard’s *Libri Quattuor Sententiarum (Four Books of Sentences)*. Derivative scholarship in the Middle Ages was a relatively common practice.¹² In Hus’s letters, references to Augustine are scattered consistently throughout, with Hus often deferring to him as an authoritative figure.

Another external influence that Hus arguably drew from was John Wyclif. Wyclif was a professor of theology and philosophy at Oxford and considered the forerunner of the Reformation for his stances on biblical authority and his subsequent translation of the Bible into the vernacular, his challenges to the doctrine of transubstantiation (the belief that the elements of communion became the broken body of Christ), and his opposition to the sale of indulgences (certificates that you could purchase for the forgiveness of sins for yourself or deceased relatives). Hus’s teachings reflected agreement with these teachings, and in addition to these commonalities, Wyclif and Hus shared similar approaches to matters such as papal authority and their ownership of property, and it is perhaps these parallels that drew accusations of Wyclifism to Hus.¹³ Hus’s letters provide some insight into his views on Wyclif’s teachings, which bring forth some of the ambiguities surrounding the extent of the influence of Wyclif’s teachings on Hus. In his letter “To Master Christian of Prachatice or John Cardinal,” he states: “[Štěpán z] Páleč (a former supporter of Hus turned opponent) calls us Wyclifites, as if we have deviated from the entire faith of Christendom.”¹⁴ This statement could be interpreted as Hus condemning Wyclif’s teachings all together, perhaps calling them heretical. On the contrary, Hus wrote a response to the forty-five articles that had been drawn from Wyclif’s writings, saying that they had been taken out of context and did not represent their true meaning.¹⁵ At the Council of

¹⁰ “John Hus to The Lords Gathered at the Supreme Court of the Kingdom of Bohemia before 14 December 1412,” in *The Letters of John Hus*, 90.

¹¹ “John Hus to a Nobleman concerning the Death Duties,” in *The Letters of John Hus*, 17.

¹² Fudge, *Jan Hus*, 30.

¹³ Fudge, *Magnificent Ride*, 43-44.

¹⁴ “John Hus to Master Christian of Prachatice or John Cardinal of Rejnšten c. June 1413,” in *The Letters of John Hus*, 102.

¹⁵ Matthew Spinka, *John Hus: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 65.

Constance, Hus condemned Wyclif's teachings yet openly admitted that he found his teachings attractive due to Wyclif's genuine efforts to convert people to the law of Christ. Hus's theology did at times focus on doctrine, but his doctrine was predominantly centered on moral reform. While Wyclif's influence on Hus is evident, Hus always made sure to adopt the parts of Wyclif's doctrines that would be perceived as palatable to the orthodoxy.¹⁶ Therefore, the connection between Wyclif and Hus exists, but perhaps in more abstract and indirect ways than is commonly believed.

Further speaking to the volatile state of the church, those who opposed Hus accused him of adopting a *sola scriptura* stance, but this accusation does not necessarily stand. Hus's approach to theology was both traditional and innovative, evident in his adherence to biblical authority that simultaneously did not seek to exclude tradition. His acknowledgement of creeds and other patristic authorities back this claim.¹⁷ In one of his letters written pertaining to his upcoming trial in Constance, Hus claims: "Consider, dear lords, even if I were fully guilty, whether they should restrain the people of God from the praise of the Lord God and grieve them by such excommunication and cessations of the divine services. They do not have the warrant in the holy Scriptures to stop them whenever they please!"¹⁸ This passage points to several pillars of Hus's theology. He asserts, in passing, that the Bible is superior to papal authority and that he himself recognizes that there is a possibility he could be wrong, but that it should not stop him, or other people, from worshiping.

Hus's Critiques of the Church

At the Council of Constance, Hus's concept of the church came under assault. The Council of Constance was called by Emperor Sigismund in 1414 to end the Papal Schism as well as to examine the teachings of Wyclif and Hus and thus reform the church. In the context of his time, Hus's concept of the *true* church was considered heretical for several reasons. A charge that was at the forefront of the accusations was his claim that the church was limited to the predestinate. This stance was considered heretical because it implied Hus's denial of the validity of the church militant, which consists of both the predestinate and the foreknown and was considered to be the "true" church.¹⁹ In his letter "To Master of Christian of Prachatice," Hus writes: "Also in this I stand: if the pope is of the predestinate and performs the pastoral office, following Christ in morals, then he is the head of as much of the Church militant as he rules."²⁰ Hus's writings affirm his stance on predestination. However, outside of this context and aligning with his respect for authority, his concept of the church is thoroughly Pauline and Augustinian, the evidence of the latter is evident in the similarities of language and principles found between Hus's writings and those of Augustine. At Constance, his stance on predestination was never *explicitly* condemned as heretical, but Hus's concept of the church was a central theme of his trial at Constance

¹⁶ Howard Kaminsky, *A History of the Hussite Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 35.

¹⁷ Fudge, *Jan Hus*, 40.

¹⁸ "John Hus to The Lords Gathered at the Supreme Court of the Kingdom of Bohemia before 14 December 1412," in *The Letters of John Hus*, 90.

¹⁹ Matthew Spinka, *John Hus' Concept of the Church* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 255-257.

²⁰ "John Hus to Master Christian of Prachatice prior to 25 April 1413," in *The Letters of John Hus*, 99.

because it was perceived as a threat, and it was believed that his theology would lead to a revolution, of which the ramifications had potential to be catastrophic.²¹

Within the church, Hus's view of the church had potential ramifications, but his stances that spoke against indulgences, simony (the selling of church offices), and papal authority were also most likely to have ramifications in society and beyond. In his letter, "To the Polish King, Władisław," Hus exhorts the ruler to rid his dominion of the practice of simony, yet he acknowledges the difficulties of doing so, given how widespread and entrenched the practice was: "but how could I expect its extermination when it has diffused its poison so widely that hardly anywhere priesthood and people can be found who are not stricken by the heresy of simony?"²² Hus's personal and complex journey with indulgences must be highlighted to understand the significance of his writings. First, Hus's personal decision to make a career in the church is rather unremarkable. At the time, the church was one of the major employers and provided opportunities for advancement and assurances of salvation. Hus himself said, "whoever wishes to live well should enter the monk's cell."²³ He would later repudiate his own statements, which put carnal desire above heavenly things. While a student at Charles University, Hus was exposed to a practice that would later cause him to protest against the church: He heard a preacher teach vehemently about indulgences, a practice upon which the late medieval church depended for economic stability.²⁴ Hus was not always opposed to indulgences. While at Charles University, Hus once used his last coins to purchase an indulgence after being moved by powerful rhetoric, ready to live a penniless life so long as he had the assurance of forgiveness of sins. However, this stance began to change for him when the sale of indulgences turned violent in Prague. Seeing the negative effects in his beloved Prague, he took a staunch position against indulgences but also against the subsequent greed it created among church leadership. In a bold letter addressed to Pope John XXIII, Hus claims his innocence since he was accused "that indulgences are naught."²⁵ Considering how heavily the Catholic Church relied on this practice for both pious and financial purposes, Hus's claims against them to the pope himself are bold in their time.

In his letters, Hus also spoke out about the greed of such practices among church leadership. In his letter "To an Unnamed Monk," he discusses the rules for clerics concerning property ownership and how they should not claim anything as their own and further that their money perishes with them.²⁶ Likewise, in his letter "To the Polish King Władisław," he says that "once the priesthood was like gold heated with love...now it has become earthly and darkened."²⁷ In this same letter, he also expresses his frustration regarding how this same group of clergy who are "pompous, luxurious, and unrestrained" are the ones accusing him of heresy and, should he keep silent on this double standard,

²¹ Fudge, *Jan Hus*, 34.

²² "John Hus to the Polish King, Władisław on 11 June 1412," in *The Letters of John Hus*, 73-74.

²³ Fudge, *Jan Hus*, 11.

²⁴ Fudge, *Jan Hus*, 11.

²⁵ "John Hus to Pope John XXIII, 1 September 1411," in *The Letters of John Hus*, 54.

²⁶ "John Hus to an Unnamed Monk, 28 February 1412," in *The Letters of John Hus*, 69.

²⁷ "John Hus to the Polish King Władisław," in *The Letters of John Hus*, 74.

then it would “make [him] a participant in their guilt and hell.”²⁸ He even goes as far as to liken it to prostitution, as written in his letter “To Christian of Prachatice, Rector of the University.”²⁹ In Hus’s view, the papacy was not the sole authority over him or the church. In light of the ways in which he had seen the greed for material things grow within the clergy, he had reasons to protest in his letters. Beyond his letters, Hus preached against the abuses of simony in Bethlehem Chapel in Prague and urged those in attendance not to pay for these privileges.³⁰ In addition to his personal grievances with the practice, his vocal opposition of this reinforces his care for people and shows how much Hus did not want a corrupt clergy to abuse their power over the people.

Hus’s commitment to the Czech people and their access to faith is evident throughout his letters. In his letter “To the People of Plzen,” Hus repudiates a letter he received that stated that priests should forbid the reading of scripture in the Czech or German vernacular.³¹ He also argues that the authors of the Gospels wrote in the language of the people they were addressing and could not understand how in light of this how priests could deny this to the Czech and German peoples. In another letter written in exile addressed “To King Sigismund,” Hus writes of how, in preparation for his trial at Constance, he posted notices in both Latin and in Czech so that perhaps King Sigismund would grant him the grace to publicly profess the faith that he held.³² Theology aside, in another letter addressed to the Praguers that he wrote while in exile, Hus’s love for the Praguers is evident. In this letter, he writes: “Albeit I am now separated from you so far that it perhaps is not fitting that I preach much to you, nevertheless, the love I have for you urges me that I say at least a few brief words to your love.”³³ This affection, which is evident through this letter, is reciprocated. This factor arguably contributed to Hus’s eventual centrality in Czech memory and history.

Hus’s time in the countryside also sheds light on why preaching in the vernacular was of such importance to him. In Prague, it was expected that clergy should have an acceptable command of Latin. However, when Hus moved to the countryside, he found that many priests there did not have an extensive command of Latin, thus hindering their abilities to draw from Latin handbooks and anthologies. Making matters even more serious, Hus also encountered some who were even illiterate. Given the situation, Hus was compelled to teach and began spreading religious knowledge in the vernacular. His goals were clear: to produce a systematic and accessible instruction on doctrine for commoners and to elevate Czech as a language of theology. This is a feat that he could not achieve alone, and with the fervent support of priests who were devoted to him and his Czech treatises that were published, his vision to bring an internal and personal Christianity to life began to gain momentum. This would lead him to arguably his most important contribution to Czech

²⁸ “John Hus to the Polish King Władisław,” in *The Letters of John Hus*, 74.

²⁹ “John Hus to Christian of Prachatice, Rector of the University, toward the end of 1412,” in *The Letters of John Hus*, 89.

³⁰ Fudge, *Jan Hus*, 63.

³¹ “John Hus to the People of Plzen, c. October 1411,” in *The Letters of John Hus*, 59-61.

³² “John Hus to King Sigismund, 1 September 1414,” in *The Letters of John Hus*, 119.

³³ “John Hus to the Praguers, 25 December 1413,” in *The Letters of John Hus*, 111.

believers at this time: his participation in the translation of parts of the Bible to the vernacular.³⁴

Hus's Afterlives

Hus's willingness to speak out against these abuses of power and his refusal to recant on his theological stances eventually cost him his life. On July 6, 1415, he was burned at the stake as a heretic after his trial at the Council of Constance. This event would have ramifications not only within the church, but for many, it would also elevate Hus as a champion of the Czech people, the effects of which we still see today. The commemoration of Hus's death as a martyr in the context of the early Bohemian Reformation became a cemented practice. His death at Constance affirmed his message: His writings in Czech were perceived by his followers in the way they were intended to be—as a call to reform within the church and as a tool that utilized the vernacular to empower Czech people. Almost immediately after his death, his letters written while in exile and in prison became liturgical texts and part of Czech popular piety, and his teachings in the vernacular gained the status of a saint's teaching. The following of a new saint is often, perhaps always, political in nature, and these words fueled a movement that would turn revolutionary in nature.³⁵ Additionally, a concept of the Czech nation as God's chosen people gained a different meaning after his death, and this was one of the most important motives for the Hussite resistance against external forces.³⁶ Hus's life before his trial and death affirm that he sought to be a teacher and a preacher above all and that his principal purpose was not only to defend the truth, which he believed in vehemently, but also to make it accessible to his people, so they too could know the truth for themselves and perhaps not be subjected to unnecessary abuses by religious authorities that sought to gatekeep and control people.

Hus's public life was a period that covered roughly two decades. However, Hus is one of those rare figures who gets to live twice, in the sense that his "afterlife" spans six centuries. When considering the potential longevity or impact of phenomena, an important factor to examine is the initial success it experienced—or lack thereof. To answer the question of how Hus, a religious figure, became a symbol of national identity that has survived six centuries and several regime changes, one must look at broader contexts. Hus's life and death was certainly impactful in religious spheres, but his legacy was cemented as a result of the social and political discontent in Bohemia at the time.³⁷ Exploring how it is that Hus's influence transcended from religious martyr to national figure is an interesting path. In order to understand how this path unfolded, it is important to explore the theological and ideological roots of the immediate product of Hus's life and death: the Hussite movement. Originating as a reform movement in Prague, it turned into a nationalist movement and

³⁴František Šmahel, "Instead of Conclusion: Jan Hus as Writer and Author," in *A Companion to Jan Hus*, eds. Ota Pavlíček and František Šmahel, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 54 (Boston: Brill, 2014), 399-405.

³⁵ Phillip N. Haberkern, *Patron Saint and Prophet: Jan Hus in the Bohemian and German Reformations*, Oxford Studies in International History (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 25.

³⁶ František Šmahel, "The National Idea, Secular Power, and Social Issues in the Political Theology of Jan Hus," in *A Companion to Jan Hus*, eds. Ota Pavlíček and František Šmahel, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 54 (Boston: Brill, 2014), 215-217.

³⁷ Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 165-167.

contributed to the construction of Hus's memory. The Hussite movement was complex in nature—it was both a revolution and a reformation. No other religious movement had gained the momentum that the Hussites in Bohemia did prior to the Protestant Reformation. Understanding the role it played is imperative to comprehend fully the beginnings of the influence that Hus's legacy had.

The Hussite movement and revolutions did not necessarily have Hus as the figure who questioned church practices yet was willing to submit to papal authority at the center of the movement. The movement, which unfolded in 1414 and for a decade after it, emerged amid more radical subscribers of Hus the martyr but less so Hus the theologian. This is evident in the Hussite belief of Utraquism. At the Council of Constance, Utraquism, or the practice of the laity partaking in communion in both bread and wine form, was condemned. Although this doctrine of Utraquism became part of Hus's legacy, he did not author it. This doctrine was birthed from the more radical wing of the religiously awakened laity at the time but became central to the Hussite movement and subsequently the Utraquist Church.³⁸ After Hus's death at the Council of Constance, the Utraquist Church would keep Hus's memory alive and lay the foundation of a pronationalist movement. Shortly after Hus's death, he was represented on altars within the Utraquist Church alongside Czech patron saints, further establishing the connotation in the minds of the public that made Hus a symbol of national identity.³⁹

This Hussite movement appealed to a demographic that desired sociopolitical freedom as well as religious reform in several facets.⁴⁰ One of these was their desire for truth as they knew it. In addition to their defiance of the Roman Catholic Church via advocating for Utraquism, Hus's movement held on to the belief that the church was made up of the elect, which was derived from Hus's Wyclifism.⁴¹ Hus's predestination beliefs would be carried forward in the Hussite movement. His teachings on predestination were perceived as a threat to the church and state polity, since, at its core, it argues that the church does not have authority over man. While Hus had no interest in applying this defiance to his secular jurisdiction, his followers did. This is evident in the *"Four Articles of Prague"* that were written shortly before the Roman Catholic Church launched the first crusade against the Hussites in 1420, which led to a series of conflicts known as the Hussite Wars. These articles were written by Hussites who wanted free preaching throughout the Kingdom of Bohemia, communion in both kinds for all faithful Christians, the divesting of church wealth, and the punishment of all mortal sins that went against the law of God.⁴² Hus and eventually his movement would cling to this belief that the Roman Catholic Church did not have authority over them, which would fuel the movement. Aligning with Hus's discontentment with the church during his time, the Hussites also heavily criticized the ways in which the church exerted and abused their authority. One of the pillars of Hus's life and legacy was his desire to make scripture and teachings available in the vernacular.

³⁸ Kaminsky, *A History of the Hussite Revolution*, 5.

³⁹ Pavel Soukup, *Jan Hus: The Life and Death of a Preacher*, Central European Studies (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2020), 8.

⁴⁰ Kaminsky, *A History of the Hussite Revolution*, 6-8.

⁴¹ Kaminsky, *A History of the Hussite Revolution*, 38.

⁴² Fudge, *The Magnificent Ride*, 98.

Fellow prominent reformers, like Jacob of Mies (1372-1429), also known as Master Jakoubek, carried on this important pillar of Hus's legacy, approving the mass and church songs in Czech.⁴³

To further understand how the Hussite movement would eventually become a protonationalist movement, it is important to understand how it radicalized exponentially right before and after Hus's death. For example, two weeks prior to Hus's death at Constance, two preachers were burned for preaching "Hus's errors."⁴⁴ The Hussites labeled these preachers defenders of their *gentis*, or race, on the basis of their Czech nationality. Strengthening the Hussite movement and its path towards a protonationalist movement were two factors: their counterparts, German Catholics, and their proximity to the nobility. German Catholics were utilized as the "other" during this period, as the Hussite movement continued to pair truth and Czech nationality as a virtuous message and German Catholics as a threat. The pairing of the Hussite church to the nobility would increase this sense of national identity. Following Hus's death, fifty-eight Hussite barons and nobles protested Hus's death at Constance and eventually sent a formal letter of protest to a later pope to appeal the actions of the Council of Constance. The Hussite barons and nobles who wrote this would go on to form a Hussite League, whose main purpose was to support the next pope as long as he followed God's law. Here, Hussitism began to take on more political dimensions. Furthermore, considering the increasing prominence that the Kingdom of Bohemia had in Europe, this protonationalist movement, paired with a state that had significant military power, was a mark of success internally, while also a cause for concern from foreign observers.

After Hus's death, the Czech people experienced a series of drastic changes, making Hus and his movement central to the living history of the Czech nation. Though the Czechs won a series of religious privileges in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, these freedoms were curtailed in the seventeenth century and Hus remained a "heretic" in the eyes of orthodox Catholic believers. Some Habsburg rulers, such as emperors Maximilian II (1527-1576) and Rudolf II (1552-1612), were sympathetic to Protestants for different reasons.⁴⁵ During this time, religious issues contributed to a revolt against the Habsburgs that resulted in the defenestration, or throwing out of a window, of two officials and a chancery secretary.⁴⁶ This event would spark the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), which was a catastrophic conflict for Europe overall. During this period, the Catholic minority in Bohemia that had been living in the shadows of the Hussites would begin to try to reclaim their power. Within Bohemia, this series of events—the Defenestration of Prague in 1618 and the decision to depose the kingdom's elected sovereign and replace him with a Protestant—led to the Battle of White Mountain in 1620. This clash on a hill would lead to an aggressive campaign to re-catholicize Bohemia with a full-blown Counter-Reformation.⁴⁷

⁴³ Kaminsky, *A History of the Hussite Revolution*, 183.

⁴⁴ Kaminsky, *A History of the Hussite Revolution*, 141.

⁴⁵ Howard Louthan, *Converting Bohemia: Force and Persuasion in the Catholic Reformation*, New Studies in European History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 9.

⁴⁶ Louthan, *Converting Bohemia*, 16.

⁴⁷ Louthan, *Converting Bohemia*, 4-5.

There were times where Hus was seen as a symbol of national identity first and a religious figure second. For instance, Catholic author Václav Hájek wrote in his *Czech Chronicle* in 1541 that Hus was someone he respected for his virtuous life, even though he could not approve of his heretical stances, thus recognizing Hus as someone who lived and died advocating for the Czech people, despite ideological differences.⁴⁸ There were instances where Hus's status as a national symbol was contested by those within the church. In the baroque era, Catholic authors were searching for figures in Czech history who could redeem the reputation of the nation and used John of Nepomuk (1345-1393) as their champion. John of Nepomuk was considered a martyr for his refusal to divulge the secrets of the confessional and used by Catholics to erase Hus from church history.⁴⁹ This effort, however, would not have lasting success.

During the Czech national revival in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Hus's label of "heretic" was traded for that of champion for the freedom of belief. His legacy, which until then had been centered around his religious contributions, acquired two new components in the nineteenth century. First, Hus and the subsequent Hussite movement were considered a prototype for social justice efforts by Western European socialists. Second, Hus became the center of national efforts for emancipation of the Czech nation from Habsburg rule. As a national figure of this kind, he continued to be a part of the history of the Czech nation during and after the creation of an independent Czechoslovak Republic in 1918. Hus was seen as the bearer of the national idea during this time.⁵⁰

In modern religious spheres, churches in the Czech Republic commemorate Hus in their liturgies, even if they do not entirely adhere to the principles of the Bohemian Reformation. Established in 1920, shortly after the formation of the nation-state, the Czechoslovak Church captured the spirit of their newly acquired independence and nationalism. It was not until 1971 that it adopted the "Hussite" part to its name thus becoming the "Czechoslovak Hussite Church." In this church, Hus is commemorated in the provisions made for the reading of Hus's letters dated between 10 and 26 June 1415 which were addressed "to all faithful Czechs."⁵¹ Additionally, the offertory sentence and the prayer after communion are extracted from Hus's works. The effect of this within this church is powerful, as it evokes historic events and places the liturgical assembly as if it were in the presence of Hus, either as those he addressed in his writings or as witnesses in his trial and execution. These elements have had their share of polemic, but it is important to understand that these practices emerged as a product of an infant church and nation that had regained their political and religious freedom and sought to shake off the chains of three centuries of Habsburg rule. The Czechoslovak Church at its beginning saw itself as a

⁴⁸ Soukup, *Jan Hus*, 9.

⁴⁹ Louthan, *Converting Bohemia*, 279-280.

⁵⁰ František Šmahel "Introduction: A Companion to Jan Hus," in *A Companion to Jan Hus*, eds. Ota Pavlíček and František Šmahel, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 54 (Boston: Brill, 2014), 1-2, 7.

⁵¹ David Holeton and Hannah Vlhova-Woner, "The Second Life of Jan Hus: Liturgy, Commemoration, and Music," in *A Companion to Jan Hus*, eds. Ota Pavlíček and František Šmahel, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 54 (Boston: Brill, 2014), 316.

part of the liberation from foreign rule, inspired by Hus's life and example that called upon ecclesial and national reform.⁵²

If you visit Prague today, there is a statue commemorating Hus in the Old Town Square thanks to nationalists who had raised the funds for this statue over a period spanning twenty-five years. It was unveiled by civic leaders in the middle of World War I to mark the 500th anniversary of his death. This choice to make Hus a national icon was not universal or without protest. While popular sentiment reflected Hus's overwhelming popularity among the majority of the Czech people, it is important within this historical context also to highlight the dissent that existed as a result of these actions. Political conflicts between Czechs and Germans heightened between 1890 and World War I, and the choice to erect a monument to Hus took a quarter century, since it was embroiled in the peak of nationalistic competition and change in Bohemia.⁵³ One cannot ignore how Germans who lived in Bohemian lands viewed Hussites as both anti-German and anti-Habsburg, and in the late nineteenth century, several protests broke out over the erection of this statue. During this time, many Catholics in Bohemia felt alienated by the pro-Hus nationalist movement and opposed it by aligning with Catholic Austria for as long as they could. However, once their defeat became inevitable, they reconciled with the dominant discourse that supported this nationalist notion.⁵⁴

"Hus" in Czech means "goose." In his letter "To the Praguers," Hus says that a goose has been caught by a net, but since a goose is a lazy, domestic bird, their net would inevitably tear, like "many other birds who fly high to God by their writings, and their lives will tear their nets," since Hus says that the truth they wanted to suppress is such that the more they tried to suppress it, the brighter it shone.⁵⁵ He was right. While he was alive, Hus accomplished what he set out to do: make the teaching of the word accessible to common people, fueled by his deep commitment to truth above all else. One could argue that this dedication to his beliefs and to the Czech people certainly merited the response that his death received. His path from martyr to national icon is perhaps a romanticized one, but for many Czech people, his living and his dying was a statement of identity above all else, which they have held onto in the face of a tumultuous history. Six hundred years later, Hus's life and death are still impactful because there is much that we can learn from him, such as the virtues of holding steadfast principles and the unrelenting pursuit of truth, and the quiet confidence one has when our convictions align with our actions.

⁵² Holeton and Vlhova-Woner, "The Second Life of Jan Hus," 315-317.

⁵³ Gary B. Cohen, *The Politics of Ethnic Survival: Germans in Prague, 1861-1914*, 2nd ed., Central European Studies (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2006), 172-176.

⁵⁴ Cynthia J. Paces, "'The Czech Nation must be Catholic!': An Alternative Version of Czech Nationalism during the First Republic," *Nationalities Papers* 27, no. 3 (1999): 407-428.

⁵⁵ "John Hus to the Praguers, c. November 1412," in *The Letters of John Hus*, 82.